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An Interview With Admiral Turner

JANE PAULEY: Admiral Stansfield Turner, President Carter's personal choice to head the Central Intelligence Agency, is in our Washington News Center this morning with Ford Rowan to talk about the agency's past and his plans for reform.

Good morning, gentlemen.

FORD ROWAN: Good morning, Jane. And good morning, Admiral Turner.

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Good morning, Ford.

ROWAN: The CIA cannot seem to get out from the burden of its past. The latest disclosures had to do with drug experimentation. Some of these tests were in connection with Army tests. And a couple of years ago, the Surgeon General of the Army said that these tests on unwitting subjects who didn't know they were being tested violated the Nuremberg war crimes code.

Do you think that any of the people that were involved in these experiments, any of the CIA people, should be prosecuted?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, that's a matter for the Justice Department to decide. This is so far in the past, twelve to twenty-four years that the CIA had any participation in administering drugs to unwitting people, that we have simply turned over the records to the Justice Department for them to see if there is any legal implications.

ROWAN: Admiral Turner, we've all read spy novels where the other side tries to lure our agents to defect by catching them in compromising positions. But now we've heard of the program called

midnight climax, in which, apparently, American men were lured from bars in San Francisco and New York into CIA safe houses, apartments with two-way mirrors, and fed LSD by prostitutes.

Can you assure us that that kind of thing was stopped and won't ever start again?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Absolutely. That's totally beyond the pale of our considerations today. I'm not here to condemn nor to condone or apologize for the past. But we just feel that in this day and age, that kind of thing is unconscionable.

ROWAN: Admiral Turner, most of the disclosures have dealt with a program called Ultra, which was the drug testing program. There was also a program called Delta, which was the operational use of drugs; not only drugs, but hypnosis and radiation and harassment techniques. And did the CIA actually go out and use these kind of things on foreigners or Americans; not tests, but operational use?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Not to my knowledge. I haven't dug into all of that past history. What we're trying to do is study the past enough to make sure that any errors in it do not recur. Beyond that, I'm concentrating my efforts for it on building an intelligence community for the future of this country.

ROWAN: Well, let me ask you about some of these changes for the future. For example, are you cutting back on the number of clandestine operatives that the CIA has overseas?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, not really. What we're cutting back on is excess overhead that has accumulated over the years. As you know, there was a major reduction in the CIA after our withdrawal from Vietnam. And we just didn't cut back quite enough. And we've got more fat; we've got more overhead than we can afford. And I want to be sure that every employee out there is fully challenged and has a really demanding job, and that's what we're getting down to: lean and mean.

ROWAN: Has the amount of covert action -- has that amount gone down in recent years, and do you foresee less of these kind of operations overseas?

ADMIRAL TURNER: The amount of covert action has reduced very remarkably over the past dozen years or so. And my feeling is that this is an exceptional circumstance that we would use covert action in. But I feel very strongly at the same time that we must maintain that capability for the kind of unusual circumstance that may arise and in which the country would find us wanting if we did not have it.

ROWAN: Admiral Turner, there's been some criticism in the

part of the CIA's analytical product, the analysis that it comes up with from the electronic surveillance and the human intelligence that comes in.

Are you pleased with the work product of the CIA?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes, I am. Now, one never can rest on his laurels or be satisfied that your analysis is as good as it could be. So we're constantly trying to improve that. And I think we have some of the best analysts in the country out there at the Central Intelligence Agency. And I'm very pleased with their overall product.

ROWAN: Admiral Turner, Vice President Mondale said recently that he thinks that all wiretapping or eavesdropping by radio by agencies of the government, and I guess that includes the National Security Agency, should be subject to court warrant and that the warrants should be issued, in his belief, on suspicion of a crime.

Do you agree with that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, we have strongly supported the bill that is before the Congress today, which will require a court warrant for any kind of a wiretapping operation inside the United States. This, we think, is a protection to the American people. It's an assurance that what is done in this country in the way of wiretapping is done in prescribed procedures that protect their rights.

ROWAN: Well, Senator [sic] Mondale went beyond that bill in suggesting it might -- Vice President Mondale, in suggesting it might be amended to require that the warrants only issue in case of suspicion for a crime. Would you go that far?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, that's not part of the bill as it is presented right now. And I think the Vice President's position may well be adopted by the Congress, and that's a fine -- a fine thing if that's what they want to do.

ROWAN: Would it hurt your effort or the effort of the NSA to listen in on conversations?

ADMIRAL TURNER: To have to go to the criminal standard? It could. It could reduce it some. But in each of these instances, we're balancing the protection of the people versus the ability to collect intelligence. And I think that the bill, as a whole, is a very good compromise in that direction.

ROWAN: Admiral Turner, there's been increasing concern that the Soviets are listening to our telephone conversations here in the United States. A study done for the White House said that

it's rather easy to intercept telephone conversations which are relayed by this microwave towers across the country.

How serious is that problem in your view?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, it's a much broader problem than what has been discussed about the Soviet intercept of these communications. The country, as a whole, has become so dependent on high speed, high volume electronic transmissions that all kinds of people or organizations could be intercepting these, be they unscrupulous citizens, gangsters. Could they be industrial spies, as well as espionage agents of many countries?

And we are working very diligently to find an overall solution that will try to protect the American citizen, whether it's against his fellow citizens or foreign espionage agents. It's a difficult technical problem, however.

ROWAN: Well, some people are worried that our government, the National Security Agency, for example, does the kind of eavesdropping that we're talking about and does it on Americans. Can you give any assurances in that regard?

ADMIRAL TURNER: The intelligence community of your country does not operate against Americans in the United States.

ROWAN: Well it has in the past, hasn't it?

ADMIRAL TURNER: That is the kind of abuse that we are dedicated to preventing re-occurring today. It's why we've gone to the Congress with the wiretap bill that you have must mentioned. And any wiretapping is in the name of foreign intelligence.

ROWAN: Thank you very much.

We're talking with Admiral Turner. And now back to Jane in New York.

PAULEY: Thank you, Ford. And time for a station break.